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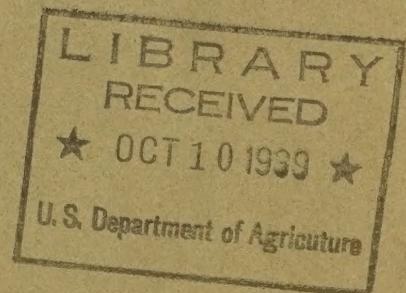
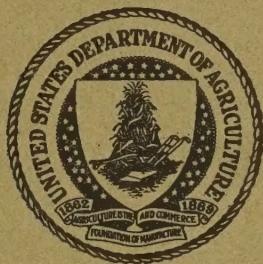


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# Land Use Adjustment in the Spring Creek Area

CAMPBELL COUNTY, WYOMING

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**Soil Conservation Service • UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**



# Land Use Adjustment in the Spring Creek Area

## Campbell County, Wyoming

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### INTRODUCTION

THROUGH its submarginal land projects in the northern Great Plains the Department of Agriculture is helping farmers develop adequate operating units for feed production and stock farming in areas where soil and climatic conditions make the land unsuitable for the cultivation of cash crops. The large numbers of citizens on relief in such areas and the serious depletion of the soil and grass are among the factors that make improvement in land use imperative. In addition, local governments have suffered from excessive tax delinquency and other financial difficulties that can be traced back to an economically unwise use of the land.

Resulting to a large extent from the misguided policy of settling the public domain, under which the homestead principles developed for a humid climate farther east were misapplied to the semiarid Plains, land use in the Plains region has been characterized by two major problems: (1) Many families settled on tracts of 160 to 640 acres that were physically and economically unfitted for cultivation. (2) An even larger number of settlers either originally or subsequently attempted livestock production on units of one

or two sections that proved far too small for successful operation. As a result numerous homesteads have been abandoned and the land left to unrestricted competitive use. Under these conditions a steady depletion of the land has been inevitable; in many areas it has undermined the entire structure of local economy.

The Spring Creek area considered in this publication is part of the northeastern Wyoming land-utilization project, one of 19 similar enterprises in which the Soil Conservation Service is cooperating with State and local agencies and with ranchers in the northern Great Plains. Consisting of about 100,000 acres, the Spring Creek area presents on a small, convenient scale some of the problems and adjustments in land utilization which characterize most of the Service's submarginal land projects in this region.

Several Federal and State agencies have contributed materially to this work. Cooperation of the United States Department of Interior made it possible to utilize in the land use adjustments the 8,099 acres of public domain, including relinquished homesteads. The Works Progress Administration has ren-

dered valuable aid in providing labor for the development phase of the program. The interest shown and the assistance given the adjustment program by residents of the area have been of vital importance to its success. This is especially true in regard to the organization and work of the Spring Creek Cooperative Livestock Association.

The northeastern Wyoming project was initiated in 1934 under the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. The program of which it was a part was later transferred to the Resettlement and Farm Security Administrations and to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. It is now being conducted by the Soil Conservation Service.

The purpose of this publication is to show in graphic form how a typical Plains area, formerly distressed by a complex of land use problems, is being placed on an economically sound basis of operation. The story is told primarily in the six exhibits that follow the text, together with the explanatory remarks on the pages facing the maps. This short section of text preceding the exhibits is intended to provide certain background material and details that are not evident from examination of the maps and captions alone.

## THE PROBLEM

Like most of eastern Wyoming, the area under consideration (Figure No. 1) was first utilized by large stock operators grazing the open range. By 1919 the area was being extensively settled under provisions of the various Homestead Acts. This settlement was largely caused by the high wartime prices and by the unusually favorable rainfall conditions from 1919 to 1922. Then followed 2 years of crop failure. From 1925 to 1928 good conditions again prevailed, but since that time crop yields have barely returned the seed planted. Despite these unfavorable conditions, land continued to be settled until the closing of the public domain to homestead entry in 1934.

Serious economic problems have therefore been inevitable. During recent years practically all operators in the area have encountered grave financial difficulties. Many settlers abandoned their farms, while extensive demands for feed and seed loans and other forms of public aid were created by those who remained. Tax delinquency was beginning to assume serious proportions when the project was initiated. Finally, the land resources of the area were being depleted by overgrazing and by the cultivation of land not primarily suitable for cash-crop production.

Typical of the western Plains country, the Spring Creek area presents an undulating prairie with frequent sandstone ridges. Soils vary from sandy types to heavy clay, the latter being the most extensive. Only in seasons of heavy rainfall can satisfactory crop yields be obtained from these soils. Most of the area is classed as primarily suitable for grazing, the rest being rated as third-grade farm land, therefore practically submarginal for cultivation. But there are some scattered

tracts suitable for growing feed crops as a part of livestock operations.

Rainfall records further indicate the long-time unsuitability of the land for cash-crop farming. The 12-year average annual precipitation (1924-35) reported by six stations of the Weather Bureau in or near Campbell County, Wyo., amounts to 14.25 inches, with a low figure of 10.89 inches for 1934 and a high of 20.98 inches in 1927.

### Necessary Changes in Land Use

Recognizing the impossibility of carrying on successful dry-land farming in this area, many operators had attempted on their own initiative to take up stock ranching in its place. In this move they came up against the problem of land ownership: Inasmuch as most of the landowners had acquired their lands through homesteading, they had title to an average of only 747 acres (Figure No. 2). Because several times that amount of land is considered necessary for a stock farm in this area, one of the major difficulties facing those operators who wished to adopt a suitable type of agriculture, was the question of how to acquire enough land for range.

The confused pattern of ownership made the acquisition of additional land, either by purchase or lease, extremely hard. Many tracts had been abandoned, and the owners were difficult to locate. There was considerable competition for available lands, owing to the large number of operators in the area; and frequently when land could be acquired by lease or purchase, it lay at some distance from the operator's headquarters, separated from him by intervening operating units. With a record of frequent crop failures behind them,

operators naturally had little capital with which to purchase the needed lands, and therefore had to rely largely on leases. Here another difficulty arose: Leases were generally obtainable only on a short-term basis, which prevented the operator from putting into effect any long-term plan for improving his range or herd.

With few exceptions, therefore, the attempts of operators in the Spring Creek area to build up satisfactory operating units were unsuccessful. The average size of these operating units before the project was started, was only 1,700 acres—less than half of what is considered desirable for this locality (Figure No. 3).

In terms of land use, the problem with which the project was concerned when it was begun in 1934 comprised principally these elements:

1. Several unquestionably submarginal dry-land farms were still being operated and needed to be shifted from futile cultivation to grazing use.

2. Operators who wished to remain in the area, and who had made a reasonable start toward a change from dry-land farming to stock farming or ranching, needed help to acquire the additional land necessary to provide them with sufficiently large operating units.

3. Nothing could be done in regard to the latter problem without a solution of the land-ownership tangle, which prevented a rational redivision of the land and left a large part of the available land under no constructive management whatever.

4. A program of range management was needed to end the steady deterioration of the grass and to build up the land for larger carrying capacity in the future.

## THE PROJECT

### Land Acquisition

In the Spring Creek area, the Government purchased 35,452 acres of privately owned land from 48 owners. The location of these tracts is shown in Figure No. 4. The land acquired consisted of small dry-land farms, abandoned homesteads, and tracts of range located at strategic points for water development. In addition to the purchases of privately owned land, relinquishments were obtained on 11 homesteads amounting to 5,828

acres. The total cost of all land purchased amounted to \$111,000, each tract having been appraised to determine its fair value. All the land included in the purchases was voluntarily offered for sale by the owners.

### Development

Following the acquisition of these submarginal tracts, considerable development work was done on the land to improve its usefulness for grazing. Water facilities, including stock

reservoirs and spring developments, have been the outstanding improvements made, as shown in Figure No. 6. Fence lines were altered to facilitate the management of the range. After tearing down purchased farm buildings that were no longer of any use, the salvaged material was utilized in the construction of a small recreational center and community hall, filling a long-felt local need. Relief labor was employed in this development program, most of the workers being residents of the area.

#### ***Increasing the Size of Operating Units***

In the purchase of submarginal land, the Government found it necessary to buy out the holdings of 27 of the 54 operators in the area. For the operators who remained in the area there was then enough land to permit each to obtain an operating unit of sufficient size and quality. The next phase of the program, therefore, was to work out a plan of reallocating the use of the purchased lands. Control by the Soil Conservation Service of 41,280 acres of purchased land, plus the few sections of public domain which had not been homesteaded, made possible the establishment of a new plan of operating units.

As a result of the allocation of the purchased lands, and the private leasing of lands not purchased by the Government, the average size of operating units in the area was increased from 1,700 acres to 4,760 acres. The comparison between the old and new patterns of operating units is shown in Figures Nos. 3 and 5. Each operator in the area now has the use of enough land for a successful stock ranch, and inasmuch as he has enough land, he can qualify for loans with which to build up his herd and make necessary improvements in farm buildings.

#### ***The Grazing Association***

Land owned by the United States is now leased to individual operators through a

cooperative grazing association. To provide for proper conservation and management of the range, the Spring Creek Cooperative Livestock Association, consisting of the 22 stockmen remaining in the area, was formed in November 1936. This association leases all federally owned land from the Government, and all the State-owned land and such absentee-owned lands as are not under direct management of a member of the association. Either directly, or through its members, the association therefore controls all land in the 100,000-acre area.

The board of directors of the grazing association, consisting of five member-operators, apportions among its members the use of the entire range controlled by the association. A grazing permit is issued to each member, stipulating the conditions under which the range is to be used and the number of head that the member is entitled to run. For these grazing permits each member is charged a fee based on the number of livestock grazed on the association's land.

The federally owned land has been leased to the association for a period of 10 years. The fee charged the association by the Government for use of the land for each current year is based on the prevailing prices of livestock and livestock products and the carrying capacity and general condition of the range. The carrying capacity of all range under the control of the association (including federally owned tracts and others) is determined each spring by the Soil Conservation Service, and the association agrees to keep the number of head grazed on its range within the limit set by the Soil Conservation Service on the basis of the carrying capacity. If unfavorable weather or other unforeseen circumstances lower the carrying capacity of the range during the season, the number of head permitted to graze the range may be decreased.

The association enforces grazing-permit regulations, prevents grazing of more than permitted numbers of livestock, maintains structures such as stock-water tanks, springs, and fences, and generally supervises the range operations of its members. The activities of the association bring the area—previously subject to the many abuses associated with absentee ownership, short-term leases, and inadequate operating units—under organized management, so that present operators enjoy a far greater stability and chance for success than was previously possible.

The complete adjustment of people to land resources has not been fully effected. A few additional tracts are under option at present; their acquisition will facilitate the necessary adjustment. Minor changes will no doubt be made from time to time by the grazing association as it works toward a thoroughly satisfactory pattern of land use for the area.

A few residents have not accepted the Government's offer to purchase and are continuing cash-crop operations on relatively small units. A few others, who draw a considerable part of their income from non-agricultural sources or who have available range outside the area, have been apportioned only small parts of the range that is managed by the association.

#### ***Effect on School Districts***

The Spring Creek area embraces parts of two school districts. As a result of the purchase program, several families with children of school age have moved from the area, making it possible to close two of the three schools formerly maintained. This will result in an annual saving of approximately \$1,800, about half of which would have had to come from school-district taxes. This saving is reflected in lower tax rates.

## **R E L O C A T I O N   O F   F A M I L I E S**

Because the area was essentially overpopulated in relation to the character of the land, the plan of adjustment necessitated the purchase of 27 units that were occupied by operators. These consisted for the most part of smaller dry-land farms. Families living on these farms accepted the Government's offer to buy, and with the cash proceeds have reestablished themselves else-

where. A few were aided in relocating by the Farm Security Administration.

Of the 27 operators whose farms were purchased and who moved from the area, 5 have located on farms in eastern Wyoming and 8 on farms in other States. Three operators have taken up nonagricultural work, 1 of them resuming his former job as a railroad conductor. Three more, 2 of whom

are bachelors, are working as hired hands on nearby ranches, while 2 elderly people have retired to spend their remaining days with relatives. One man of foreign birth has returned to his native land. Another died shortly after selling his farm. Inquiries regarding the 4 remaining families have failed to bring information as to their present situation.

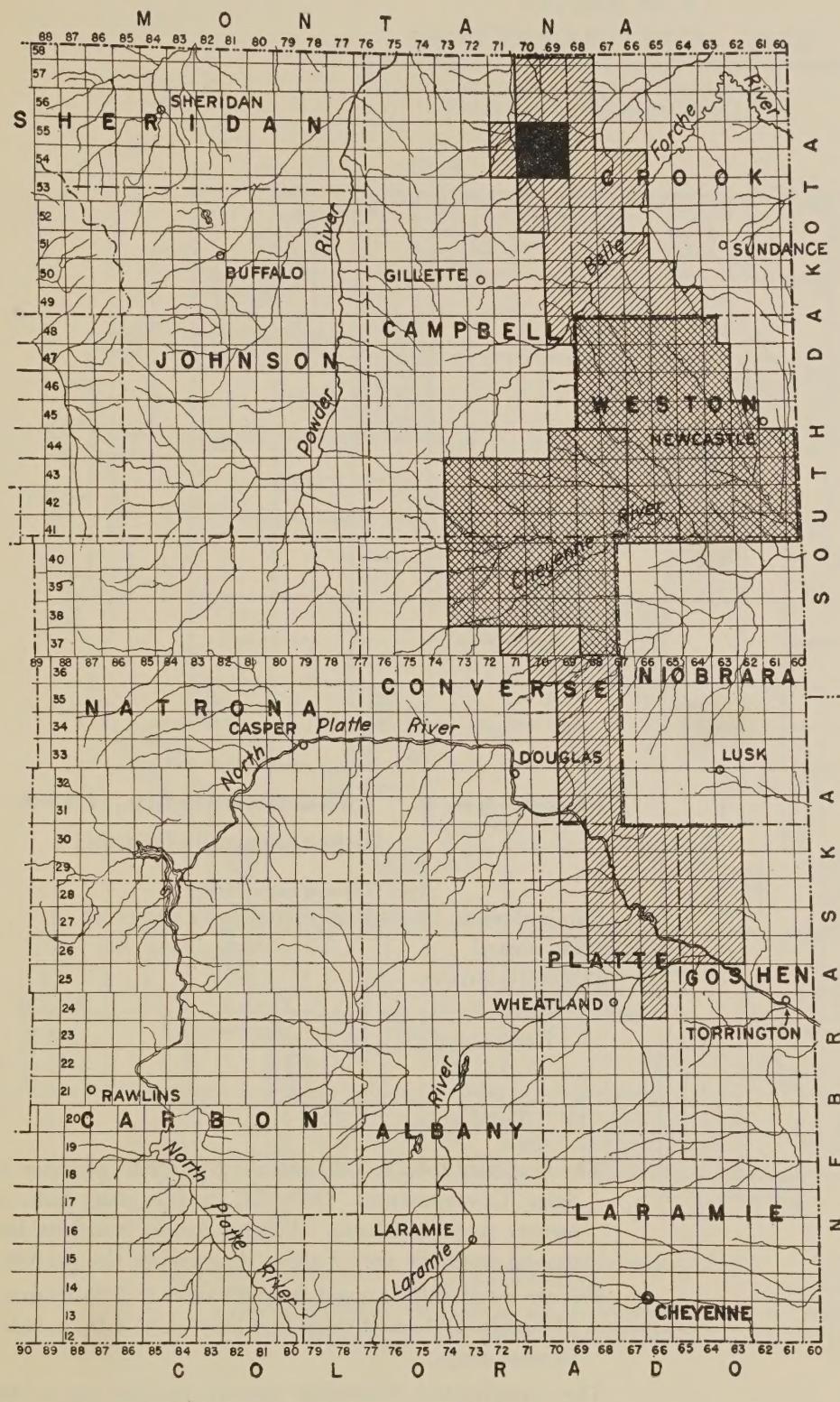
**Figure No. 1.**

**Land Utilization Project Areas in Wyoming.**

The Spring Creek area, considered in this report, is part of a large problem area in eastern Wyoming where similar conditions of land use prevail.

Most of the land included in the Spring Creek area has been classified as grazing land; small acreages of third-grade farm land make up the remainder.

Although the land is almost entirely submarginal for cash-crop production, much of it was settled by dry-land farmers.



**Figure No. 2. Land Ownership, 1934.**

[Before changes in land use]

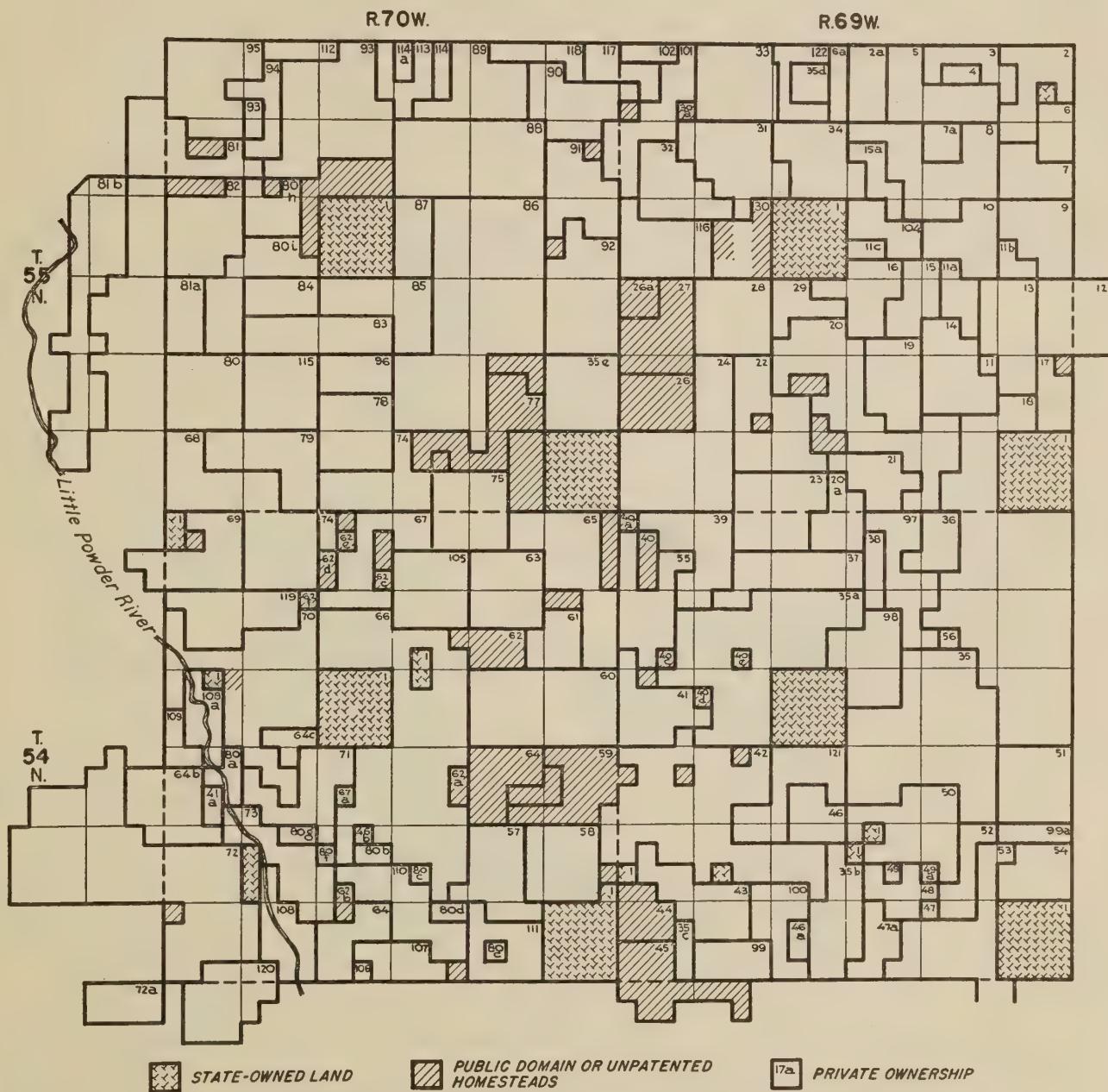
<i>Class of ownership</i>	<i>Acres</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Public domain (including public water reserves).....	2,440	2
State owned.....	5,680	6
Privately owned:		
Deeded.....	83,770	
Homestead.....	5,828	
	89,598	92
Total area.....	97,718	100

The land was held by 120 private owners in addition to Federal and State Governments. Only 51, or less than half, of the private owners were residents. Fifteen former resident landowners had moved from the area a short time before the project was initiated.

Private ownerships ranged from 40 acres to 5,520 acres, and averaged 747 acres. Most of them had been settled by people who intended to raise crops.

The complicated ownership pattern reveals one of the major difficulties to be overcome in attempting to place the land in range use, as illustrated in the following exhibit.

**FIGURE NO. 2**  
**OWNERSHIP PATTERN - 1934**  
 (PREVIOUS TO STARTING ADJUSTMENT PROGRAM)  
 APPROXIMATELY 4 TOWNSHIPS  
 CAMPBELL COUNTY, WYOMING



**Figure No. 3. Operating Units, 1934.**

[Before changes in land use]

Number of operating units..... 54  
Private operators had been able to block together the 120 ownerships into 54 operating units, ranging from 80 to 8,360 acres, and averaging 1,700 acres.

Most of these units were too small for successful operation as stock ranches—35 of the 54 units contained less than 2,000 acres, whereas between 4,000 and 5,000 acres are considered a desirable average. Moreover, many units were difficult to manage because they consisted of widely separated, small tracts of land.

The pattern of operating units was very unstable because:

Much of the land was held on short-term lease.

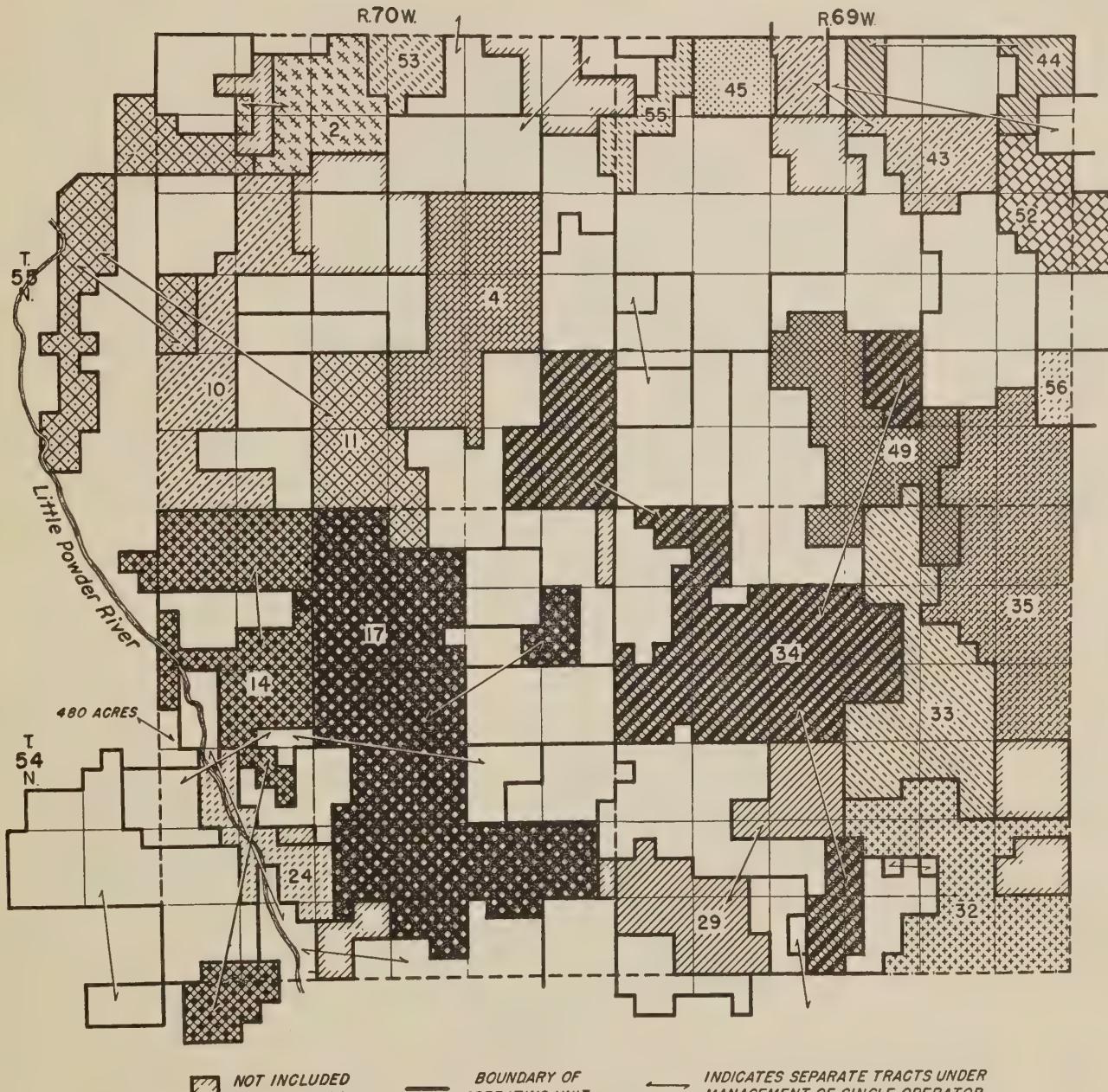
Many tracts were abandoned—not included in any operating unit but used by one or more operators without legal title.

The small size of units disqualified most operators for commercial credit or even for Government rehabilitation loans.

Small operators were unable to acquire needed additional land, yet so long as their capital was tied up in their farms, they could not afford to move to better farming areas elsewhere.

FIGURE NO. 3

OPERATING UNITS - 1934  
(PREVIOUS TO STARTING ADJUSTMENT PROGRAM)  
APPROXIMATELY 4 TOWNSHIPS  
CAMPBELL COUNTY, WYOMING



**Figure No. 4. Land Ownership, 1938.**

[After Government purchase]

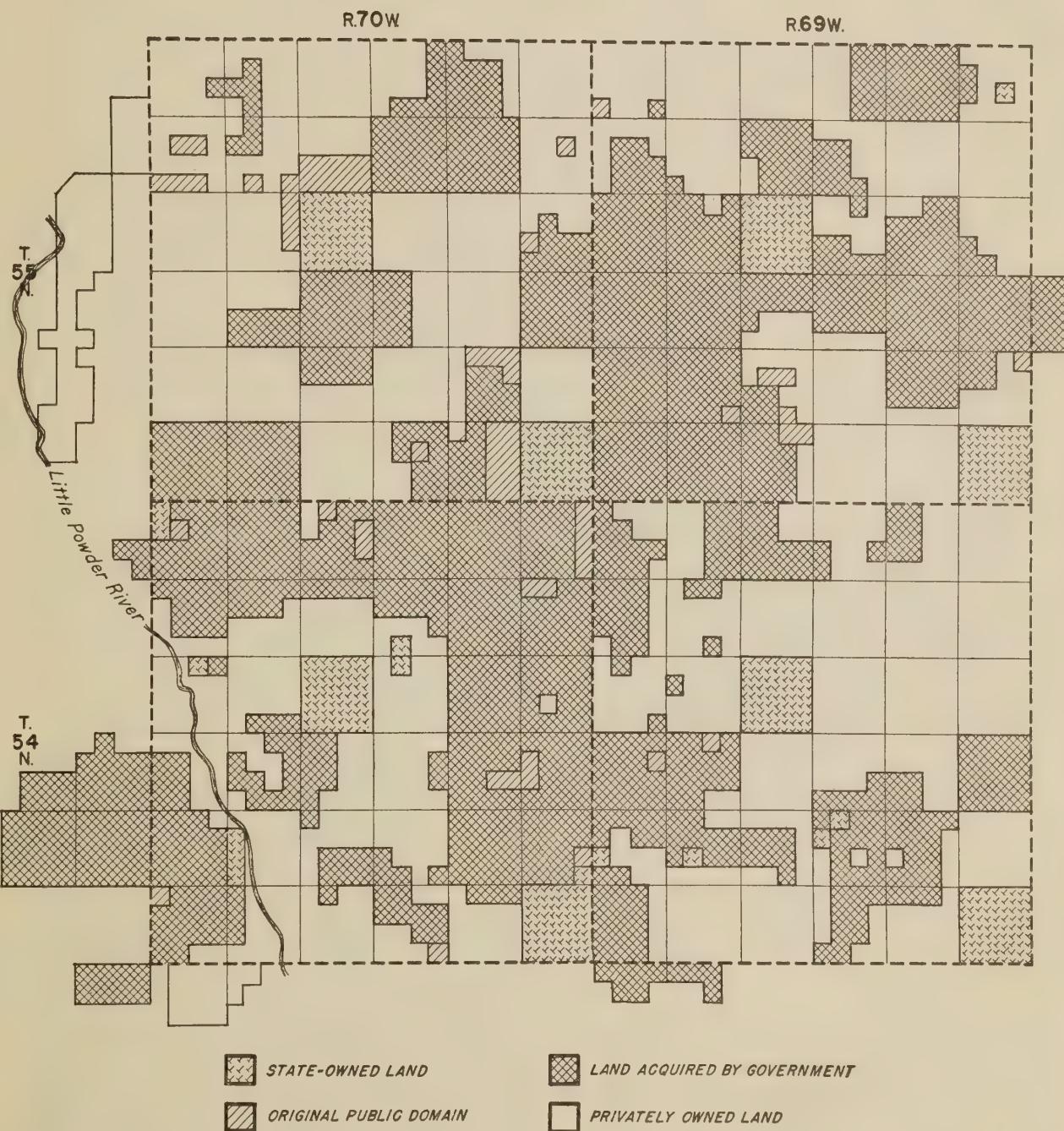
The Government acquired 41,280 acres, reducing the number of separate private ownerships from 120 to 61.

The new ownership pattern clears the way to a readjustment of land use for grazing purposes.

Following the Government purchase, the classes of land ownership (1938) were:

<i>Class of Ownership</i>	<i>Acres</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Federally owned.....	43,720	45
State owned.....	5,680	6
Privately owned.....	48,318	49
Total area.....	97,718	100

FIGURE NO. 4  
OWNERSHIP PATTERN - 1938  
(AFTER ADJUSTMENT PROGRAM WAS CARRIED THROUGH)  
APPROXIMATELY 4 TOWNSHIPS  
CAMPBELL COUNTY, WYOMING

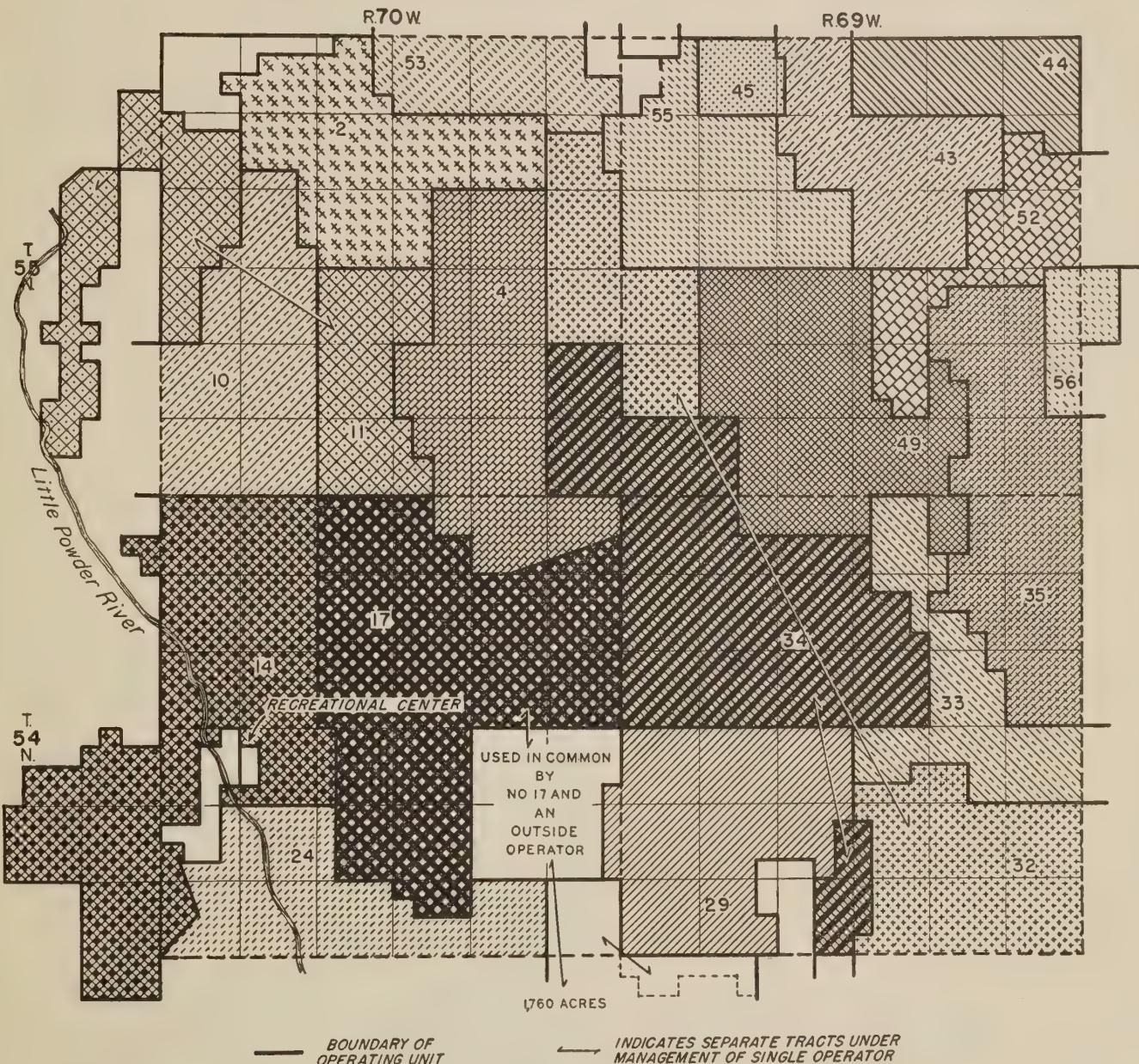


**Figure No. 5. Operating Units, 1938.**

[After adjustments were made]

Number of operating units .....	25
(22 operators are members of grazing association).	
A cooperative grazing association, organized in conjunction with the project, leases all publicly owned land, and all absentee-owned land that is not under management of individual members of the association. These lands are apportioned to resident operators, all of whom now have access to sufficient range.	
Average size of operating units has been increased to approximately 4,760 acres ( $7\frac{1}{2}$ sections).	
A stable pattern of operating units has resulted from:	
Sound management of all lands by the association.	
Apportionment of land in contiguous and well-blocked tracts.	
Size of present units qualifies operators for commercial credit or Government loans, thus enabling them to restock their range up to its carrying capacity.	

**FIGURE NO. 5**  
**OPERATING UNITS - 1938**  
(AFTER ADJUSTMENT PROGRAM WAS CARRIED THROUGH)  
APPROXIMATELY 4 TOWNSHIPS  
**CAMPBELL COUNTY, WYOMING**



(17) NUMBERS WITHIN UNITS CORRESPOND WITH OPERATING UNIT NUMBERS ON FIGURE NO. 3

**Figure No. 6.**

**Development Work Accomplished, 1938.**

61 residents of the area received more than \$32,000 in wages from development work carried out through the Works Progress Administration.

<i>Major jobs</i>	<i>Cost</i>
22 stock-water impounding dams built .....	\$22,131.00
25 sets of useless farm building obliterated .....	2,386.00
22 miles of fence constructed .....	3,157.00
20 miles of old fence salvaged .....	583.00
6 springs developed for stock water, recreational center developed, and community hall constructed .....	5,779.00

Cost of development per acre served ..... .33

Sixty percent of the material used for construction of recreational center and hall was salvaged from the project lands.

Individual operators have fenced the lands apportioned to them at no cost to the Government.

Most families whose land was acquired received enough for their equity and for labor to reestablish themselves elsewhere with little other help.

FIGURE NO. 6  
DEVELOPMENT WORK ACCOMPLISHED  
1935 TO 1938  
APPROXIMATELY 4 TOWNSHIPS  
CAMPBELL COUNTY, WYOMING

